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Tzvetan Todorov's Humanism

I am going to follow Todorov's practice in *On Human Diversity (Nous- et Les Autres)* and start with biography. Readers of the book may recall that he speaks of knowing evil in early life, when he lived in a country under Stalinist rule. Everything that he has written as an intellectual historian and moral philosopher has been marked by the experience. Even his earlier work as literary theorist in the structuralist mode can be seen in that light. In *Literature and its Theorists (Critique de la Critique)*, he describes two life or career altering encounters, one with Arthur Koesder and the other with Isaiah Berlin, that had the effect of opening new paths in his work. In the conversation with Koesder, Todorov was rebuked by the older man for his attitude of "fatalism and indifference" toward politics that he shared with his generation. Like Todorov and before him, Koesder was inward with the terrors of totalitarianism, but he had rejected fatalism. Todorov writes: "And upon seeing him I suddenly felt that his very existence was proof that my own words [of fatalism and indifference] were false" (156). As with Koestler, the conversation with Berlin took place after Todorov had given a lecture. The subject "had to do with Henry James and 'the structural analysis of narrative.'" Berlin had been in the audience, and afterwards "said something like this: 'Henry James, yes; narrative structures, yes, of course. But why don't you look into things like nineteenth-century nihilism and liberalism? All that's quite interesting, you know'" (157). As Todorov tells the story, Berlin and Koesder made him see that his exclusive focus on the structures of literature grew out of revulsion from the political life he had known in Bulgaria. The Stalinist regime under which he had grown up had discredited the idea of politics and of history. Formalism was an antidote to the ideological contamination of literary and philosophical texts that was commonplace in Stalinist regimes. It was the brief conversations with both Koestler and Berlin that turned his attention to matters of ethics, culture and politics in ways that made it possible for him to deal with his past in a positive and productive manner. It has also

enabled him to conceive a humanist philosophy that addresses the concerns of those who have not shared his experiences.

Imperfect Garden (Le jardin imparfait) is his humanist manifesto. In that work as well as in *On Human Diversity*, Todorov engages the humanist tradition in France in order to revise and restate it for the present. In the opening chapter of *Imperfect Garden*, he distinguishes among four intellectual families of the modern period: conservatism, scientism, individualism and humanism. The conservatives believe that "the price of freedom" is too high and that "it is therefore better to renounce freedom." Though they know that a return to the past is impossible, they regret its passing "and try to preserve vestiges of it while opposing the demands of a more radical modernity" (4). Bonald and De Maistre are Todorov's examples in that tradition. They have entered into a bargain with the devil and have renounced freedom. (I should note that Anglo-American conservatism doesn't quite fit in this definition.) The second family, the scientists of scientific persuasion (not all scientists subscribe to scientism and there are non-scientists who follow scientism) dismiss the devil, because they believe that freedom is at best "very limited." Science rules the roost. Through "observation and reasoning," scientists will discover the laws of nature. Free only to choose knowledge, human beings in their actions are determined by the laws of nature. In the French tradition, Todorov offers the examples of Diderot and Renan. The third family, the individualists are radical modernists who find in the waning authority of God and society both a liberation from all moral and social constraint and the pleasures of solitude. Contemporary examples of this family are legion.

Humanists, the fourth family, are anthropocentric. They adhere to "doctrines in which man [and not God] is the point of departure and the point of reference for human actions" (6). Unlike the conservative, the humanist does not regret the previous state of things and embraces the modern world. Unlike the scientific intellectual, the humanist values science, but does not accept scientism's imperial ambition to explain and dominate the world. The humanist affirms freedom against scientific determinism. He or she joins the individualist in affirming freedom, but seeks to overcome solitude in the common life. (Todorov has in fact devoted a book to *Life in Common (La Vie Commune)*). In both *Imperfect Garden* and *On Human Diversity*, he provides an incisive and critical account of the exemplary figures of the humanist tradition, Montaigne, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Constant, among others. Montesquieu and Rousseau are the writers with whom he has the greatest affinity, but even they do not escape his critical scrutiny. Like all families, the

humanist family has its differences; Todorov, a family member, spells out those differences and what he regards as errancies in some of his relatives. A detailed exposition of his engagement with his predecessors in the tradition, however, is outside the scope of this paper. Enough to say that his humanism is at once a restatement of the Enlightenment tradition and a revision of it. The equipoise that he strives for between our universal humanity and a respect for human diversity reflects both his own personal experiences as citizen, or more accurately as subject in a totalitarian society, and the experience of life in an advanced democratic society.

In affirming our common humanity, Todorov repudiates the totalitarians who dehumanize and exterminate their enemies and the xenophobes, who, wishing to preserve the purity of the race, anathematize the exile, the immigrant, the foreigner. His critical vigilance extends beyond these obvious targets to those who are neither totalitarians nor xenophobes, but who from the best of intentions deprive themselves and us of the grounds for judging a person or a society according to universal canons of justice, equality and freedom. Montaigne (to take an instance from the past) and Levi-Strauss (from the present) affirm a cultural relativism out of respect for cultural diversity, but in the process endorse a moral relativism that would allow for what they abhor: the cruel and oppressive practices of cultures and societies. They are allergic to, all universal judgments from a concern that these judgments might be a mask for cultural imperialism, though in practice they inconsistently exercise such judgments. With characteristic scrupulousness, Todorov acknowledges that universalism may camouflage imperialism. The problem then is to define and exercise it in such a way as to immunize it from such usage.

His humanist agenda has three main components: "the autonomy of the *I*," the finality of the *you*" "the universality of the *they*" which have a rough equivalency in the slogan of the French Revolution, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. He is persuasive and moving in the way he formulates and elaborates his humanist creed. There is, however, a limitation to his approach, which he acknowledges. "The use to which I mean to put the authors of the past is responsible for the way I read them — a dialogue with history rather than a history in the strict sense. I aspire to understand their thought and to convey its meaning more than to explain it by tracing its causes or reconstituting its original context" (8). This limitation is not confined to *Imperfect Garden* from which I have just quoted. It applies as well to *On Human Diversity*. Todorov engages every writer of the past as if he were present (in

both senses of the word). In bringing writers of the past up to the present and in effect turning them into contemporaries, he exposes their strengths and weaknesses, their logicity and illogicity as he would in the work of any contemporary writer. As in his earlier work on narrative, he focuses on the structural coherences and incoherences of an argument. What he does not take into account are the personal and historical circumstances to which the thought may have been a response. Consider, for example, his treatment of Montaigne. Montaigne was a skeptic who mistrusted all universal judgments and yet, as Todorov points out, was inconsistent when he himself made such judgments. He finds Montaigne unwittingly oscillating between a conscious relativism and an unconscious universalism. It seems to me, however, that the wayward *essai* that Montaigne invented resists the binary of relativism and universalism. It allows for a certain freedom from the logical rigor Todorov applies to it. In historical context, Montaigne's relativism might be understood as a humane antidote to the religious and ethnocentric dogmatism of his time. His very inconsistency may have been a sign that he was not dogmatic, unlike the radical skeptics of our own time, who would prohibit condemnation of female circumcision or stoning for adultery or other forms of cruelty sanctioned by various cultures? One conflates the various manifestations of skepticism and relativism throughout history at the cost of fully understanding them. My main point is that the rich and valuable internal critique of the French Enlightenment tradition that Todorov provides should be complemented by an historical perspective. I don't think he would disagree. As he remarks in his introduction to *Imperfect Garden*, "This desire to go downstream rather than upstream, and to stay in the realm of ideas, does not imply that I would consider the opposite choice illegitimate; it is simply not part of my present project" (8).

If I had to single out the most important theme of his humanism, it would be his argument for a moral universalism. The qualification "moral" is essential. Todorov does not derive his universalism from an empirical study of the diversity of human experience and behavior. Following Rousseau and Kant, he deduces or intuitively a universal human capacity for liberty. "What every human being has in common with all other human beings is the ability (Todorov's word is "*capacite*") to refuse determinations; in more solemn terms, let me say that liberty is the distinctive feature of the human species" (*On Human Diversity* 390). As an empirical claim, this statement would encounter difficulties. There are cultures and societies that do not promote the liberty of its members who in fact live lives of conformity to authority. Moreover, it is

by no means clear that most people desire or are capable of real freedom or have a common understanding of what freedom entails. Even its passionate champions, Alexander Herzen and Anton Chekhov lament what they believe to be a fear of freedom in ordinary humanity. Herzen provides the following metaphor: "The fact that a few flying fish exist does not demonstrate that fish in general were created to fly, or are not fundamentally quite content to stay below the surface of the water, forever away from the sun and the light" (Quoted by Isaiah Berlin, Introduction to Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts* xxxvii). Rousseau famously said that men are born free, but of course they are not. They are vulnerable at birth, unable to walk and talk, and subject to the control of their parents, whether benevolent or not. They evolve to freedom or a capacity for it. And that capacity, a moral capacity, is what Todorov has in mind, what I believe he has in mind, when he speaks of liberty as a distinctive trait of the human species.

There is a moral objection that the cultural relativist might mount. Moral universalism of any kind is invidious and coercive; it gives rise to a hierarchy of cultures. It allows for the judgment that one culture is superior to another. This objection has some force, and it can be illustrated by the work of an admirable writer, who cannot be accused of ethnocentrism or imperialist affinities. Here is a passage from an essay by the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski:

We affirm our belonging to European culture by our ability to view ourselves at a distance, critically, through the eyes of others; by the fact that we value tolerance in public life and skepticism in our intellectual work, and recognize the need to confront, in both the scientific and legal spheres, as many opinions as possible; in short, by leaving the field of uncertainty open. And while we concede all this, we also maintain, tacitly or explicitly, that a culture capable of expressing these ideas in a vigorous way, defending them, and introducing them, however imperfectly, into its life, is a superior culture. If we behave fanatically, if we protect our exclusivity to the extent that we will not consider other arguments, if we are incapable of self-questioning, then we think we are behaving barbarically; consequently, we must also consider barbaric the fanatics of other traditions, locked like us, into their own exclusivity. (*Modernity on Endless Trial* 22)

Objectivity, tolerance, openness, skepticism, self-criticism: these are values that in their nature are non-coercive and that one should want to universalize without embarrassment. What is unnecessary in this passage, however, is the declaration of the superiority of European culture to those cultures that do

not embrace these values. For two reasons: 1) these values are rarely actualized in the ordinary lives of Europeans and 2) the affirmation ignores values (for instance that of community) in other cultures wherein Europeans might be deficient. A culture is not simply a set of ideals; it is also a system of practices. Nor is a culture to be encompassed by its *political* ideals and practices. One might then assert the universal importance of certain values without affirming the superiority of a culture that claims (I hesitate to say embodies) them. A hierarchy of cultures does not necessarily follow from a belief in universal values. One culture may be superior in one respect, another in a different respect. It is to Todorov's credit that he separates the judgment of values from that of cultures. There is no hierarchy of cultures in his conception of humanism. He rejects the view that a culture can be declared "superior to others, a unique incarnation of the universal," though "cultures can be compared and more may be found to praise in one place, more to blame in another" (*On Human Diversity* 391).

We may agree about the necessity for universal values, but may differ on what they are or how they should be understood. It is not sufficient merely to assert that liberty is a value. Its meaning is not self-evident and is subject to a variety of interpretations. Is negative liberty, as defined by Isaiah Berlin, which protects the individual person from the tyranny of the state and society sufficient, or do we need a more positive conception to empower persons to be free? One cannot be free without the basic necessities of life (food, clothing and shelter), and yet contentment that comes from having them provided may be inimical to freedom. Herzen's admonition is still relevant: "The bourgeois has enough to eat, his possessions are protected, so he has lost interest in freedom, in independence" (*My Past and Thoughts* 111). And what do we mean by equality? It cannot mean equality of talent or of beauty or of character. Is it equality of opportunity or of result? And even if there is agreement about the meaning of equality, there are always quarrels in the concrete about how it can be realized. And then there is the question of the relationship between values. As Tocqueville has argued, liberty and equality are not necessarily compatible. How should we choose between them when they are in conflict? Is there a supervening value that one might invoke in order to adjudicate the conflict? We are in the domain of debate and dialogue. Isaiah Berlin believes that the debate about ultimate or universal values is often intractable, and that the conflicts that invariably arise between cultures can be mitigated by tolerance, if not by rational resolution. One such conflict would be that between Western democracy and political Islam. Berlin and Todorov

would be on the same side of the conflict. Where they might differ, I believe, is on the question of the philosophical intractability of the conflict. Berlin considers himself a value pluralist, not a relativist. He insists, against some of his critics, that pluralism is compatible with universality. But compared to Todorov, Berlin is a minimalist in his universalism.

As for value conflicts within a culture, for instance, between the claim of liberty and the claim of equality, I think that historical context would be an important consideration in resolving the debate. For instance, when the advocacy of liberty becomes strident and turns into libertarianism at the expense of those who suffer from inequalities, then the emphasis should be placed on equality. Conversely, when the advocacy of equality turns into a leveling egalitarianism which overrides the claim of liberty, there is the need to affirm liberty. The existence of these conflicts, however, does not undermine the argument for universals. If I understand Todorov correctly, the claim for universals is the beginning of a process or journey that is never completed. Unlike the relativist, who would simply throw up his hands at the possibility of a meaningful discourse about universals, he conceives it as essential to our humanity. But he is without illusion that the perfection implied by universality can ever be achieved. Though sympathetic with Rousseau's definition of man as a creature who seeks perfection, both his own and that of society, he knows it to be an impossibility and that the belief that it has been achieved dangerous. The outcome of the attempt to install a perfect society and a perfect human being is the cruelty of totalitarianism. As Isaiah Berlin has made clear, "it is not that particular [scientific or Utopian] theories — whether eighteenth-century theories such as Rousseau's or nineteenth-century theories such as Marx's — [are] defective [and that] better ones in principle [could], be discovered [which] would at last do the job of making men happy and free," but it is rather "that theories, in this sense, are not appropriate as such in these situations" (*The Sense of Reality* 50). What is required, both Berlin and Todorov are in agreement, is wise judgment based on a tension between realism and idealism, the resolution of which would only bring disaster.

Without moral universals, we do not have a way of affirming our common humanity in a non-biological sense. Which does not distress a reactionary conservative like Joseph de Maistre (cited a number of times by Todorov), who declares: "there is no such thing as *man* in the world. I have seen during my life, Frenchmen, Italians, Russians etc. But so far as *man* is concerned, I declare that I never in my life met him; if he exists he is unknown

to me." Of course, a contemporary relativist without the racist or anti-Semitic bias of a Maistre might resist the idea of a common humanity in the cultural sense while at the same time insisting that there is *man* in the biological sense. It is, however, the nationalistic mindset of a Maistre and even its more moderate versions that causes Todorov to focus on its human costs.

He speaks of "the fundamental incompatibility between patriotism and humanism" (*On Human Diversity* 249). "The inherent flaw" in patriotism is patent. "By preferring one segment of humanity over the rest, the citizen transgresses the fundamental principle of morality, that of universality; without saying so openly he acknowledges that men are not equal" (183). Patriotism is group egoism. When accompanied by the power of the nation to act, it may turn into imperialism. "Deutschland über Alles," is the candid and noxious expression of a patriotic fantasy. But what should we make of the nationalism of subaltern nations or groups that wish to liberate themselves from imperial control and achieve self-determination? Todorov has an interesting answer: self-determination is an individualist, not a group or collective concept. It has been illicitly taken over by national and ethnic groups. If an individual or a minority within the group does not subscribe to the movement of "self-determination," then the majority or the leadership of the movement may in turn become oppressive. But is patriotism always and necessarily noxious? It may be a rallying cry against an imperial invader; it may even support democratic values in a democratic nation. Consider the case of Martin Luther King, who appealed to the American Constitution in his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. His humanism and patriotism were wholly consistent with each other. Those who live up to the humane ideals of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are true patriots, those who oppose them unpatriotic. I don't think that one can dismiss the appeal to patriotism here as simply rhetorical.

Citizenship is the term for membership in a nation. In its ideal form, it entails civic responsibility, a complement of one's humanness not an antithesis to it. Moreover, citizenship, as well as membership in organizations and ethnic communities, may provide a sense of solidarity that universalism fails to provide. There is friendship, neighborliness, and of course, family, which for Todorov is not, unlike nationalism, inimical to the sentiment of universality. His suspicion of nationalism in its prevailing forms is understandable and justified. However, since the nation-state is a political and economic reality that is here to stay for longer than the immediate future, it does not serve the cause of humanism to think of it as an intransigent

antithetical reality. Rather, one should try to reform its conception and self-conception, so as to humanize it. I have in mind, for instance, the increasing acceptance of the nation as a multi-ethnic entity. The risks of cultural provincialism need to be balanced against the risks of global homogenization. Realist as well as idealist, Todorov has a keen appreciation of the need for nation states, notwithstanding the perils of nationalism:

Sovereignty builds the institutions of the state... people have more rights as citizens of a state — even of an undemocratic one — than they do as members of the human race. Human rights not backed up by the laws of the land and the machinery of a state are very flimsy indeed. So destroying a state in defense of human rights is always problematic and may lead us to throw out the baby with the bath water. (*Hope and Memory* 278)

Todorov's universalism does not blind him to the particularities of our existence.

It is neither possible nor desirable to escape those particularities. Our ethnicity, language, customs, political behavior or misbehavior all belong to what makes us individuals. And much of what constitutes our particularity is intransitive. It does not lead to the universal, nor does it have to if its effects on the lives of others are benign or neutral. We may even take pride in the special character of our language, our dress, our cuisine, even our nationality so long as we do not insist that others adopt them and abandon their own. As Todorov comments, "differences like food, dress and hygiene do not require value judgments" (*On Human Diversity* 105-06). And as Montaigne slyly suggests in the conclusion to his essay "Of Cannibals," wearing trousers is not a universal. Which should not stop us from trying to find, in Todorov's words, "a path that leads toward universalism — by deepening the specificity of the particular within which one dwells." He is here referring to "cultural nationalism (that is, attachment to one's culture)" (*On Human Diversity* 172). The routes to universalism vary from culture to culture. What comes to mind is the world literature of Shakespeare, Dante and Rousseau, who both incorporate and transcend their national identities.

Knowing from his own experience what it means to be a victim of imperial domination, he is quick to defend the national or ethnic identity of the oppressed. At the same time, he knows how self-defeating reveling in resentment and the desire for revenge can be, which is always potential in ethnic or racial or religious or national consciousness. Having breathed the air of cosmopolitanism, he knows how important it is for people of whatever

national or ethnic identity to extend their imaginations beyond the boundary of that identity to embrace others. Cosmopolitanism may be a necessary condition for a non-coercive universalism, for it allows for the mixing of diverse individuals and groups of varied backgrounds in a condition of equality — without requiring an erasure of the differences among them.

I want to turn now to Todorov's confrontation of the horrors of genocide in the twentieth-century, in particular the Nazi Holocaust. *Facing the Extreme* (*Face à l'Extrême*) is his book on the subject. On the question of whether the Holocaust was a unique event in the history of mankind, *sui generis* and intransitive, he responds in a persuasively nuanced way. Certainly, there were unique features to the Holocaust, especially in the technical efficiency with which it accomplished in record time the dehumanization and extermination of six million Jews. It was unparalleled in the secrecy in which it took place and in its cold blooded systematic aspect. The Jews are the exemplary victims, dispersed throughout the world, universally mistrusted and despised for their alleged betrayal of the messiah and envied for their infiltration into positions of power and influence. All true. But Todorov resists, and rightly I believe, the prevailing view of its radical uniqueness, which renders it unavailable to representation and rational discourse. We are all familiar with Adorno's famous remark that poetry after the Holocaust is impossible. Those who hold this view have turned the Holocaust into a sacred event, which can be named only at the risk of desecration. Sacralization, as Todorov has argued in a number of contexts, is anathema to historical truth. The moral imperative is to discover what the Holocaust has in common with other genocides (and human history is replete with them) in order to learn how to prevent them from recurring in the future. There is of course no guarantee that such knowledge will prevent their recurrence, but the view that the Holocaust is *sui generis* does guarantee that we will learn nothing from it. Todorov is persuasive (at least to me) in this matter. He comes by it, I believe, through his universalism, which attempts to find in particular human experiences (no matter how exceptionally wonderful or awful) their universality.

Similarly, he refuses to regard the criminals who perpetrated the crimes of genocide and the population that passively gave them support or were indifferent to the actions as monsters of another (non-human) species. The Manichean division of the world into good and evil, light and dark is anathema

to him. The potentiality for committing these crimes or averting one's eyes is in all of us. Again his universalist bias comes into play. I agree that the averting of one's eyes may be endemic to the human condition and the courageous and risky attempt to intervene is exceptional, though there have been many exceptions. I am less willing, however, to place those not under duress who planned and executed the crimes on the spectrum of normal humanity. (Frankly, I am not sure they deserve to be on the spectrum of humanity — certainly, not in the honorific sense.) Following Karl Jaspers in *The Question of German Guilt*, Todorov rejects the idea of collective national guilt. He cites Jaspers: "Only individuals have a will and can therefore be held responsible" (*Facing the Extreme* 238). If collective guilt means the blanket condemnation of all Germans, then to do so would be a travesty of justice. There were Germans who resisted and perished at the hands of the Nazis. There is the question of degree of complicity. The passive bystander and the person behind the closed door need to be distinguished from those who actively perpetrated the crimes. Not all Germans were responsible for the Holocaust and there are different degrees of responsibility for those who were. Moreover, one wants to avoid the racist implications of a judgment that would visit the sins of a generation on ancestors and descendants. Beethoven, Goethe, Schiller and even Nietzsche bear no responsibility, and neither does the generation that came into existence shortly before and after 1945.

And yet I would not give up altogether on the idea of collective guilt or responsibility. Jaspers himself distinguishes among four kinds of guilt: criminal, moral, political and metaphysical, and effectively assigns political guilt to the Germans: "Political guilt: This, involving the deeds of statesmen and of the citizenry of a state, results in my having to bear the consequences of the state whose power governs me and under whose order I live. Everybody is co-responsible for the way he is governed" (*The Question of German Guilt* 3V). And elsewhere, he asserts: "It would, indeed, be an evasion and a false excuse if we Germans tried to exculpate ourselves by pointing to the guilt of being human" (100). So I would question Jaspers's claim, which Todorov endorses, that only individuals have a will and can be held responsible. We are here in the realm of moral psychology. What should we make of the actions of a crowd in which the individual surrenders his will to a charismatic leader? It is not enough to say that every individual in the crowd or tribe or nation must be held responsible. There is the phenomenon of crowd behavior that I don't believe can be reduced to the individual wills that compose the crowd. In surrendering his or her will, each individual contributes to the will of the crowd. And in

order to understand and judge its behavior, we need not only an understanding of the will of crowds in general, but also of the culture of particular crowds. Which is not to say that all group behavior is noxious. Todorov points out that the Danes refused to collaborate with the Nazis and helped Jews escape to Sweden, a neutral country, while the Bulgarians protected their own Jews. In order to understand the behavior of the Danes and the Bulgarians we need to know something more than individual psychology. What is it in their cultures and histories that distinguished their behavior from that of other countries in Nazi occupied Europe? Similarly, what in the culture and the history of Germany led to the Holocaust? By reducing the question of guilt to the individual, we effectively deprive ourselves of learning what in the culture of Germany (note, not the genes of the Germans) produced the Germany of 1933-45, and we also allow the Germans to ignore their own history and responsibility. It is, it seems to me, in the spirit of the argument of both Jaspers and Todorov that this kind of responsible understanding is essential to the redemption of nations that have committed mass crimes and to the prevention of crimes by other nations and groups.

I cannot leave the subject without protesting a formulation by Jaspers, cited by Todorov. To say that "'the Germans are guilty of the Holocaust'" is as absurd as claiming that 'the Jews are guilty of the crucifixion'" (*Face a l'Extreme* 221, my trans.; the sentence is omitted from the English translation). Jaspers has constructed a facile and misleading symmetry. The sentence implies a parallel between the Nazi stereotyping and mass murder of the Jews and the judgment of collective guilt passed by Jean Amery, a camp survivor. The treatment of the Jews by the Nazis was a monstrous unprovoked cruelty. The judgment of the Germans by Jewish survivors and others is a reaction to the cruelty unaccompanied by genocide or even a lesser violence. Nor does it even follow that such a judgment would have legal consequences. Nazi stereotyping and its consequences and the view that the Germans are collectively guilty (even if one wishes to quarrel with the view) do not, in my opinion, belong in the same discourse. Todorov himself is alert to the dangers of such comparisons in *A French Tragedy*, his superb little book on an episode in France during the late stages of World War II involving executions and retaliations between the Germans and their French collaborators on one side, and the Resistance, on the other. He remarks that despite similar injustices and cruelties on both sides there is "a qualitative difference between the two, an irreducible asymmetry, which resides in their ideals, in totalitarianism versus

democracy" (126). How much greater the asymmetry between the cruelty of the Nazis and the resentments of the camp survivor!

I sympathize with Todorov's caveats against resentment and hatred as a response to cruelty and hatred, especially after the fact. These emotions are self-disfiguring, and accomplish nothing. I prefer the resentment-free attitude of Primo Levi, an almost perfect model for Todorov, to that of Jean Amery, who affirms his resentments and his belief in the collective guilt of Germans. But learning his history and temperament from his work, I have no interest in passing judgment on Amery. Todorov too understands and respects the feelings of a survivor like Amery. It needs to be said at this juncture that Todorov does not counsel resignation in the face of evil. On the contrary, he passionately believes that all forms of institutional cruelty should be understood and fought wherever they appear. He has come a long way from the fatalism and indifference of his earlier attitude. And he believes that the struggle can best be waged with a purity of heart and mind, to which resentment (an emotion to which Amery admits) and hatred are alien. He is rare in his understanding that excessive reaction to the cruelty of others can itself become cruelty and generate an endless cycle of violence.

In describing and characterizing the behavior of those who acted courageously and admirably in the dark times of Nazi and Stalinist oppression, Todorov affirms the ordinary virtues. "Ordinary" here is opposed to "heroic," against which he entertains an animus. Understandably so, given the devastations that warrior class heroism has wrought in our history. Of course, there is the benign heroism of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. The idea of heroism cannot be entirely dispensed with, and Todorov knows it. What he wants is a transvaluation of the idea so as to eliminate its bravado, its destructiveness at all costs. In *A French Tragedy*, he speaks of the courage of "anti-heroic heroes," whose lives and dignity were superior to destructive political agendas. They were willing to sacrifice themselves not to win glory, but rather to save the lives of others. As Todorov acknowledges, "in the great moments of history, heroes are necessary to the homeland" (134). It is the everyday virtues, however, that sustain human communities.

I have stated my reservations about the way Todorov turns the humanist thinkers of the past into contemporaries. What is missed in the process are the historical pressures and personal circumstances that affected (note I avoid the word "determined") their thinking. But it needs also to be said that something important is gained from the choice that Todorov makes — and that is a sense of the immediacy and urgency of the thought of the past. In his classic *History*

of *England*, Thomas Babbington Macaulay distinguishes between two approaches to the past: one that judges the present by the past and the other that judges the past by the present, the former he characterizes as Tory or conservative, the latter as Whig or liberal. Todorov exemplifies neither approach. Having inherited and revised the values of the Enlightenment, he judges the past and present as he judges self and others — according to universal standards. Critical and self-critical, equally suspicious of Utopian enthusiasms and nihilistic despair, he desires not simply to understand (the objective of most historians), but to change an always imperfect world for the better.

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